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'This Place Is Producing'

To get the view from the top at the CIA, Washington bureau chief Mel Elfin and correspondent David Martin talked with director Stansfield Turner. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: Every single person we have talked to, without exception, says morale has never, ever, been lower than it is right now.

TURNER: I categorically deny that. There is not a morale problem in the CIA today... This place is producing. The President of the United States is pleased with it. And the product is high. People work twelve-, sixteen-hour days out here. I have people, at the drop of a hat, working all day Sunday, coming over to my house Sunday night with the results. They are dedicated, wonderful, inspired people. Now, there are complaints. There's griping. There is in every organization of the government. And when you're in a period of transition to new objectives, new methods, new management systems, new styles of openness, of course there are people who are complaining, because it isn't being done the way it was yesterday.

Q. Your dismissal of 212 persons obviously hurt morale. Would you do it again, and in exactly the same way?

A. What I will do differently the next time is spread the notification out over a longer period of time... But I did what I think was the only honest, proper thing to do for the agency and for the country... There's just nobody around here that doesn't know that we're in a time when we have to improve, we have to change, we have to adapt.

Q. Do you have confidence in the clandestine service, or are you afraid that there is something else hidden there?

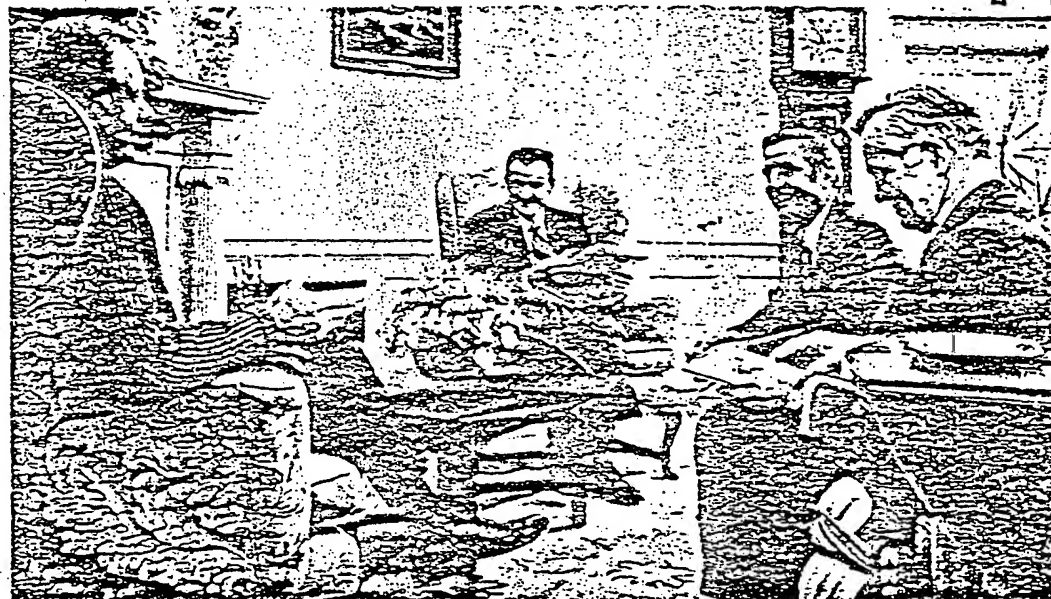
A. I took a skeptical attitude and I hired [Robert D. Williams] to come in, and I gave him a carte blanche [to investigate]. At the end of six months, I said to the clandestine service, "I am well satisfied with the way you are doing things. I have no concern that you are doing things deliberately without orders, or contrary to orders." I also told them there were going to be 820 of them less, you know. The good news and the bad news.

Q. Can the United States still take action covertly in a national emergency?

A. Yes. We're scaling that down in our objectives... but I will fight to the last to retain an arrow in my quiver to do political action. But not thousands of people to do paramilitary things like we had in Vietnam—a small paramilitary capability. Modest, tuned, honed and ready to go. It's very important that it be there, particularly to combat terrorism.

Q. Have such things as the Congressional hearings, allegations by former agents who have written books and the fact that many people are leaving the CIA in a disgruntled mood caused any sources to dry up because they are afraid of leaks?

A. Oh, that's just balderdash. I have such confidence in these people who leave. They're patriotic Americans. Now, some of them have shown a very unprofessional stance in running to the press, but, you know, even Frank Snepp was very circumspect in writing his book, as far as I can tell. There is apprehension around the world as to how the Congressional thing will settle out. But we haven't had, to the best of our knowledge, leaks from the Congressional side that can be pinpointed.



Turner with Carter, Brzezinski and Mondale: 'The President is pleased'

Q. A retired CIA official told us recently that if he had been a Russian working in the Soviet Embassy in Washington, he could probably have all the documents and information presently given to the Congress of the United States within a year.

A. I don't believe it. I really don't. The documents we give to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence are held in one series of closely guarded rooms, 24-hour guards on them, alarm systems, locks, the whole works. They're not running around in congressmen's offices.

I went to see a senator the other day, just to pay a courtesy call on him. We got discussing something, and he suddenly told me, "Write it down." He was so security-conscious. His room hadn't been debugged for a while and [when] I slipped into saying something classified, we started exchanging notes, just the two of us sitting in the room there... I mean,

one of the benefits [in] oversight now is that the Congress is really getting to know what intelligence is about; they are recognizing how much of a responsibility they're shouldering.

Q. Have any of the friendly services around the world shown reluctance to share information with the CIA because of leaks?

A. I have heard that foreign services are questioning how our procedures are working out under these circumstances. I have zero evidence that it has, at this stage, resulted in a degradation in the quality or quantity of information we get from them... What's changed in the last decade is [that] technical-intelligence collection has become so sophisticated, so expensive, that in all areas of the world we can do better in many of these technical areas than anybody else.

Q. Is it true the CIA had to contract out to the Rand Corp. for the first draft of this year's

National Intelligence Estimate on the Soviet Union? If so, does this reflect in any way on the most important job you do around here, which is the estimate?

A. We contract in a number of areas. I don't want to discuss that NIE in particular, but I see nothing wrong with getting, in specialized areas, the very best talent the country can bring to bear on a national intelligence estimate... This is only one little piece of the Soviet estimate. We went out and hired a fellow who worked for us a few months ago. He was working on this before he left.

We [also] go outside when it is, in our opinion, to the government's best interests... to make sure all the divergent views are represented. And if you don't happen to have hawks and doves on some particular situation or you don't have specialists on this and that, you complement your in-house talent.